



PROMOTING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO WATER RESOURCES

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The new stakeholders

WATER IS ONE OF THE MOST CRITICAL productive assets in Southern Africa. Access was shaped by colonial policies that privileged white commercial farmers, and by policies after independence that sought to include black commercial farmers. Population growth, rising export agriculture (including expansion of irrigated land), and recurring droughts exacerbate water scarcity in the region. In response, both Malawi and Zimbabwe have instituted sweeping reforms of their natural resource base, including new water, land, and irrigation laws and policies.

These new policies stress comprehensive river basin management, stakeholder participation, markets, and pricing, along with the technology needed to promote water use efficiency, recover costs, and conserve the resource. The reforms shift decision-making and management authority from central government to district and municipal levels, remove subsidies, institution of pricing and other regulatory measures, adopt an integrated approach to resource management both ecologically and across economic sectors and ministries, and promote social equity in resource access.

A key assumption is that transfer of decision-making powers to new stakeholder organizations, beneficiary, and user groups will increase the full participation of disadvantaged populations in these institutions, broaden access to water resources, and

result in more efficient and sustainable resource use. Indeed, recent BASIS-funded applied research in Tanzania found that the greater the participation of farmers of all types in planning and implementing the rehabilitation and management of small-scale irrigation schemes, the greater the schemes' technical, environmental, and economic sustainability.

Successful and truly broad based water reform in both countries will be closely linked to land reform and other processes of change, yet there are three signs that the reforms may not adequately improve the water access of historically disadvantaged groups:

1. New water policies are hampered by a lack of integration with other reform efforts.
2. Participation in decentralized management institutions may prove too complex for disadvantaged groups.
3. Existing informal or customary rights of access to water, particularly wetland cultivation, have been largely invisible in the reforms.

By examining implementation of reforms in two different country contexts, BASIS researchers will be able to determine possible barriers to broad and equitable access to water resources. The project's recommendations to policymakers will help disadvantaged groups advocate for their interests in the new institutional context.

Examining the signs

Integrating reforms

Water, land, and irrigation reforms in Malawi and Zimbabwe are proceeding independently, designed as they were by separate ministries. Under the new Water Act, catchment councils in Zimbabwe are to be supported by levying water permits from the commercial farm sector. As a result of current land reform, however, this sector is now greatly diminished in size and ability to pay. In Malawi, the same water-related responsibilities have been delegated to two new institutions. New water policy mandates the creation of Catchment Management Authorities that are to have many of the same functions delegated to districts under the Local Government Act.

Advocating participation

Lack of integrated planning and harmonization of reforms not only reduces the impacts of reform but also limits the participation of some disadvantaged groups the reforms were intended to include. The new institutions, such as catchment councils in Zimbabwe and smallholder irrigation scheme user associations in Malawi, emphasize resource management and generation of revenues, not the water-related development projects of greatest interest to poor communal and customary area farmers.

The focus on management and on user pay principles has little-understood implications for broadening access to these new institutions and, ultimately, for efforts to address equity issues. Creating decentralized management institutions is not enough to promote equitable access to water resources. Disadvantaged groups are less likely to successfully negotiate complex and confusing institutional structures since they lack time, finances, and other resources.

Recognizing customary rights

BASIS will be able to examine the impacts of water and irrigation reforms in social contexts where women's rights and access to resources differ significantly. Zimbabweans practice patrilineal inheritance patterns and patrilocal residence after marriage. Women leave home and join their husbands' families at marriage. Their use rights to land and water resources are mediated through their husbands.

In contrast, people in much of the southern and central regions of Malawi practice matrilineal inherit-

ance and matrilineal residence. Women in these contexts have more secure rights to resources, independent of their husbands. The new water, irrigation, and land policies and laws pay little attention to these customary practices, or (as is the case with the draft land policy in Malawi) tend to cast matrilineal inheritance as an obstacle in ways not thought the case for patrilineal inheritance.

Irrigation: where water and land intersect

Government and private sector commercial farmers in both countries developed "formal" irrigation schemes

"Formal" irrigation schemes and facilities presently are the focus of reform

and facilities, which presently are the focus of reform. Malawi's new irrigation policy calls for existing government-run irrigation schemes, most of which are in a state of collapse, to be renovated and turned over to users. BASIS research will take place in the Lake Chilwa Catchment in the southern region, a largely matrilineal area with high population densities and severe resource depletion. The Domasi Irrigation Scheme has been identified as a pilot project and is presently undergoing renovation with support from the International Fund for Agricultural Development. We will examine similar processes on the Likangala Irrigation Scheme where no donor support is available for renovations or handover to users.

In Zimbabwe, many previously white-owned commercial farms that relied on extensive irrigation facilities are to be transferred to new owners. Research will focus on the Manyame and Mazowe catchments in regions where the massive transfer of land is underway from the private commercial sector to a great number of communal area farmers and urban-based people. Productivity of these large-scale commercial farms depends on access to water and on the development and functioning of large-scale irrigation facilities. Little attention has been given to how water resources and existing irrigation infrastructure will be governed or administered in the reform process, although such issues are critical to the

success of the reforms themselves and to the productivity of the commercial farm sector in Zimbabwe's economy.

BASIS researchers will examine how the new land and water reform policies will affect rights to and uses of water and land resources on the irrigated farms in Malawi and Zimbabwe, focusing on how residents negotiate rights of access and use in the new institutions being established.

While the governments of Malawi and Zimbabwe have turned to small-scale irrigation schemes as a part of their plans to increase participation and improve agricultural productivity, food production, and farmers' income, there have been few studies on the significance of the "informal" irrigation sector in communal and customary lands: the gardens used in the dry season along streams, near boreholes, and in wetlands. There is a dearth of information on these at

The amount of land in informal irrigation dwarfs that in formal government-run smallholder irrigations schemes

a national level, and yet the amount of land in informal irrigation dwarfs that in formal government-run smallholder irrigation schemes in these countries. These lands have become sites of intense contestation as they are prized for agriculture and grazing, and as protected environmental sites. These sites are critical for household security, income, and survival. This informal sector remains invisible in the new water and irrigation policies and laws, although these reforms no doubt will affect access and use rights to these valuable lands.

In Malawi, these garden sites (called *dimba*) are highly desired but few families have access to them. Access appears to be decreasing as a result of the general increase in population and pressure on existing resources, the value of the streambed gardens as sites of production of vegetables in great demand in urban and peri-urban areas, and the opening of burley tobacco growing to smallholder farmers since 1990. *Dimbas* in customary lands are treated essentially as family property, while streams more resemble open access.

Studies indicate that communal area farmers in Zimbabwe have greater access to informal irrigation sites than is the case in Malawi, but little is known about how rights of access are negotiated in the patrilineal context. Improved market access for the products of this sector would enormously benefit the poor, both male and female farmers, but only if they have secure rights to this watered land. It also is likely that these informal irrigation sites in both countries are growing in importance due to the AIDS epidemic. It is difficult for families to maintain enough labor for work in agriculture throughout the year in order to keep an adequate food supply.

Although Malawi and Zimbabwe are implementing similar style reforms, their economic, political, and social circumstances make it unlikely that these will take the same shape or have the same impacts once implemented. The countries' differences will affect how successfully the reforms broaden poor farmers' and women's access to institutions and resources. In general, Zimbabwe has a much larger commercial farm sector, with well-developed dam and irrigation facilities in government and private hands. Malawi still has unmet needs for potable water and sanitation facilities. Water users in Zimbabwe, therefore, are likely to have a greater capacity to pay for water permits and new infrastructure and to be able to shoulder the costs of the new, more participatory institutional structures.

Impacts

The research will track the new water, irrigation, and other related reforms in order to examine how national, district, and local social structures and power relations shape implementation, and hence limit or promote access among poor communal and customary area farmers and women. Unequal access to water, irrigated land, and other resources poses development challenges. The growing food insecurity in both Malawi and Zimbabwe presents short- and longer-term problems.

Both countries are conforming to international policy in decentralizing their water management institutions, and this project will identify and document best policies and practices for enabling the poor's participation in this decentralized resource management. BASIS researchers will alert policymakers to the equity impacts of the reforms and assist



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disadvantaged groups to advocate for their interests in the new institutional context. The work will address current questions, such as how to increase women's participation and how to increase poor people's tenurial security to wetlands. BASIS research will provide a clearer analysis of the role of gender in resource systems in Zimbabwe and Malawi, with the specific aim of advising policymakers on how to avoid discriminating against women or undermining customary rights they currently enjoy. The project will identify the socioeconomic factors that lead to the successful transfer of irrigation schemes to the irrigators and will provide best practices to assist technicians and bureaucrats in promoting genuine participation by women and the poor in these new governance institutions.



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